

Your Clothes and Fashion Choices can Cause Climate Change, so Choose Carefully

Wearing clothes might seem like it doesn't hurt the environment nearly as much as driving and flying or a multitude of other polluting activities. The reality, though, is different. Every time we get dressed, we literally put climate change on our backs. Indeed, the textile industry is one of the world's worst polluters. Changing what we wear can help reduce climate change and protect the environment.

The Hidden Climate Cost of Fast Fashion

From water used in cottonfields or oil used for creating polyester to dyes that pollute water to ships or planes spewing greenhouse gasses as they bring clothes to us, manufacturing clothing hurts the environment.

Vogue magazine calls fashion the second most polluting industry on the planet, second only to oil production. Of the 100 billion items produced annually, 60 percent will be discarded within a year. Moreover, the Environmental Audit Committee found that each year 15 percent of all clothing fabric is wasted at the cutting stage of production, 200 million trees are felled to make cellulosic fabrics and about 21 billion tons of textiles end up in landfills.

Producing clothes uses about 93 billion cubic meters of water a year, German broadcaster Deutsche Welte (DW) found, and cotton alone is responsible for 2.6 percent of global water usage. Whereas air travel accounted for about 2.5 percent of global CO2 emissions in 2018, the fashion industry was responsible for four times that amount.

A key issue, the MacArthur Foundation noted, is that clothing production has nearly doubled in the past 15 years and the textiles industry now uses 98 million tonnes of materials per year. The Royal Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA) explained, too, that most clothes contain synthetic fabrics such as nylon, acrylic and elastane, which are made with fossil fuels.

Overall, McKinsey research showed, the sector was responsible for 2.1 billion metric tons of greenhouse-gas (GHG) emissions in 2018, about the same quantity as France, Germany and the UK combined.

The shift towards fast fashion - the fast mass production of cheap clothing from firms such as Zara and Shein - exacerbates the problem. As fast fashion delivers fashionable clothing at ever-cheaper prices and faster speeds, the negative impact on the environment increases. While some of these firms say they are sustainable, the RSA's report, *Fast Fashion's Plastic Problem*, accused fast fashion companies of "greenwashing" by producing small sustainable ranges while making most of their products from petrochemicals.

Companies and Consumers Hardly Care

While the problems are huge, consumers and governments as well as companies themselves have made few changes. Even though high street brands have responded to environmentally conscious consumers by launching sustainability lines such as H&M's 'Conscious' collection, DW said vague words such as "ethical" and "sustainable" have led to accusations of greenwashing.

One issue is that the industry is so large that governments may be reluctant to force any changes. The US\$1.3 trillion clothing industry employs more than 300 million people globally, the MacArthur Foundation noted, and the production of cotton alone accounts for almost 7 percent of employment in some low-income countries.

Consumers also don't seem to care, the Wall Street Journal observed. Except during the pandemic, the amount of clothing sold globally has been increasing steadily.

And the producers, from farmers to garment producers to global brands, have little impetus to change when revenues are so high.

Fashion is Slowly Starting to Shift

While change has been slow at best, climate-related disasters and greater consumer awareness are among the factors leading some consumers to consider reducing GHGs and some companies to realise that they need to do more.

Online consignment store Thred Up said that we are in the early stages of a radical transformation in retail, for example, with consumers are prioritising sustainability and policymakers getting on board. And even though Gen Z consumers have embraced the throwaway culture, Market intelligence firm Edited said their role as the new activist generation could soon see them pioneering sustainable change.

UBS Bank similarly sees consumer behavioural changes including recycling, regulation and campaign group pressure starting to take hold. While quantifying changes in consumer behaviour is fraught with difficulty, UBS said “we believe a 10-30 percent reduction in fast fashion units sold over 5-10 years is possible.”

With changes underway and investors asking more questions about sustainability, the Wall Street Journal suggests that shareholders would be wise to handle fashion stocks carefully, as ESG risks don't appear to be priced in. UBS similarly said that although it does not yet have evidence that sustainability considerations are moving shoppers to buy less, it has seen customer attitudes change quickly in other industries and sees large potential repercussions for fashion brands.

On the producer side, almost 90 percent of the measures McKinsely identified to improve production and retailing would cost less than \$50 per metric ton of GHG emissions abated and a majority would lead to cost savings for the industry. Both the MacArthur Foundation's *A New Textile Economy* and McKinsey have detailed suggestions for phasing out substances of concern, from transforming the way clothes are designed and using more renewable inputs to making better use of resources.

Startups and investors are tackling the problems too. Alchemie's innovation that enables high colour fastness without washing eliminates water pollution while reducing costs by 50 percent, for instance, and the Good Fashion Fund initiative focuses its investments on firms that deliver a 50 percent reduction in materials, energy or water usage.

Each of us, as consumers, can play our part too. We can choose clothes that are made sustainably and that will last, for example, while only buying what we need and wearing what we buy longer rather than disposing of it quickly. Forgoing fast fashion will have tremendous benefits for the planet.

While changes like these fly in the face of trends towards more consumption, consumers and companies that change their practices can have a massive impact in mitigating climate change.